

# Revealing and re-valuing cultural intermediaries in the 'real' creative city : insights from a diary-keeping exercise

Perry, B.; Smith, K.; Warren, S.

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# Revealing and re-valuing cultural intermediaries in the 'real' creative city: Insights from a diary-keeping exercise

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## Beth Perry

Reader, Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures,  
University of Salford – Manchester, UK

## Karen Smith

Research Fellow, Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures, University of Salford –  
Manchester, UK

## Saskia Warren

Research Fellow, Department of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of  
Birmingham, UK

## Abstract

From critics and cultural commentators to professionals who mediate between production and consumption for economic gain, the term 'cultural intermediaries' has been variously interpreted over recent decades. Often framed as self-interested entrepreneurs seeking to maximise economic value the wider set of political, social and moral motivations of cultural workers have been often overlooked. Drawing on a diary-keeping exercise with 20 cultural workers in Greater Manchester and Birmingham in 2013, we suggest that a 'third' wave of studies of cultural intermediaries is needed, which emphasises socially engaged practices and non-economic values. The study reveals a field of cultural work which mediates between professionalised and everyday cultural ecologies, one which is often invisible and undervalued. Combining methodological insights into diary-keeping as a reflexive exercise, the study suggests that we should reclaim and re-value the term 'cultural

## Corresponding author:

Beth Perry, Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures, University of Salford –  
Manchester, Joule House, Acton Square, The Crescent, Salford M5 4WT, UK.

Email: [b.perry@salford.ac.uk](mailto:b.perry@salford.ac.uk)

intermediary' to make visible this socially grounded cultural work, particularly in the current era of austerity and cuts to the arts in England.

### **Keywords**

Community engagement, cultural intermediaries, cultural workers, diaries, England, reflexivity

## **Introduction**

'Cultural intermediaries' is a term attributed to cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu that has spawned multiple readings and re-interpretations (Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2012). Cultural intermediaries are often considered a cornerstone for 'recent attempts to characterize the contemporary cultural entrepreneur as a creative, dynamic figure seeking out new "practical utopias" through experimental combinations of economic and cultural practice' (Banks, 2006: 458). As the main protagonists in Richard Florida's creative class, cultural intermediaries are characterised by a creative free spirit driven by the desire to make money and forge new connections between production and consumption (Florida, 2002).

With the rise of the creative industries and mass production from the mid-20th century, policies at international, national and local levels have increasingly been based on the idea that economic value can be extracted from cultural work (Flew, 2013). Consequently, the attraction and retention of cultural workers in sectors such as advertising, media, video games, music, film and fashion have been a key priority for governments across the world, in the belief that future economic success is dependent on this 'creative class' (Florida, 2002). This has given rise to a set of studies of the activities of cultural intermediaries in different industrial sectors and the roles they play in adding economic value to cultural goods and services (Cronin, 2004; Foster, Manning and Terkla, 2015; Hracs, 2015; Moor, 2008). Drawing on Bob Jessop's notion of 'economic imaginaries', O'Connor emphasises how intermediaries work within these imaginaries to 'circumscribe a set of activities which can then become the objective correlate of policy intervention and measurement' (O'Connor, 2015: 2; Jessop, 2005: 145). This implies a particular kind of cultural worker, in pursuit of both economic and symbolic profit, 'reflecting the interplay, inherent in contemporary cultural production, between generating new styles of life and protecting established hierarchies of cultural value' (Wright, 2005: 106).

What emerges is a rather singular narrative of self-interested cultural workers, underpinned by an interest in the relative autonomy or interpenetration of cultural-economic fields. Critics of a neoliberal creative economy discourse have decried cultural intermediaries as self-interested entrepreneurs, or champions of the 'creative class', through whose labour post-industrial societies can be re-thought and re-built. With an emphasis on the economic value of culture, studies have tended to emphasise the development of the creative industries or large-scale cultural infrastructures. For Peck (2005), the contemporary spread of creativity strategies perfectly works with 'the grain of extant neoliberal development agendas, framed around interurban competition, gentrification, middle-class consumption and place-making'. In a similar vein, Wilson and Keil (2008)

argue that the success of the creative industries is premised in fact on the exploitation of the 'real' creative class: the mass of urban poor whose poverty and deprivation is an essential pre-condition of their creativity. In the field of urban studies, this leads scholars such as Paul Chatterton (2000) to ask, 'Will the real creative city please stand up?'

Cultural intermediaries have often been identified operating within – and in the interests of – a formalised, professional sphere of culture, to the neglect of everyday or vernacular cultural practices (Edensor et al., 2010). Yet, this singular narrative is less clear-cut than it might first seem, and relatively little attention has been given to analysis of the working practices of cultural workers who operate in diverse professionalised and everyday cultural ecologies. The wider set of political, social and moral motivations of cultural workers have been often overlooked, particularly those that seek not only to advance their own interests but also to develop connections with excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged communities (Banks, 2006). There is a gap in understanding this 'other' form of cultural work and its potential to mediate between different values in the creative economy.

Through a diary-keeping exercise with cultural workers in two UK cities, this article seeks to re-appropriate the terminology of 'cultural intermediaries' to draw attention to those working in liminal spaces between professionalised and everyday cultural ecologies. The article particularly focuses on the extent to which the working practices and conditions of cultural workers engaging with diverse communities enable or constrain the realisation of their broader aspirations and the value they feel is attributed to their work. It is divided into four sections. The first section offers a critical review of the literature on cultural intermediaries and their actual and potential roles in relation to processes of cultural and economic value-making. It suggests that dominant usages of the term have become limited to an econo-centric perspective. The second section describes the method and limitations of diary-keeping in revealing the narratives of cultural work and the nature of the evidence generated. Diaries are inherently subjective, agency-centred narratives of working practices, but nonetheless reveal important dynamics and insights into the issues facing contemporary cultural workers at the intersection between culture and community. The third section gives voice to participants, highlighting insights from the diary-keeping exercise according to four main themes: motivations and values, practices of cultural work, the culture/community interface, and subjectivities and identities. The final section offers a conclusion and set of future research directions based on the work carried out to date.

The article concludes by challenging the singular narrative of the cultural intermediary as a self-interested entrepreneur with a focus on the economic exploitation of culture. Suggesting instead that there are in fact at least three differing interpretations of 'cultural intermediary', this method of research puts forward the voice of individuals working in the field of cultural work and makes visible cultural working practices, often hidden and undervalued, which mediate between professionalised and everyday cultural ecologies. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute to understanding the place of cultural intermediaries in society, who they are and what they do in practice.

## Contested concepts of 'cultural' 'intermediaries'?

Under conditions of contemporary capitalism, the domains of culture and economy have been increasingly intertwined in the formation of a 'culture industry' (Adorno, 1991;

Scott, 2000). Writers have analysed the relationships between culture and economy with particular attention to how markets of production and consumption are mediated by different individuals and organisations (Lash and Lury, 2007). The term ‘cultural intermediary’ was originally coined by Bourdieu to refer to critics or cultural commentators within the newly emerging mass media. Indeed, in his original conception it was the relations between production and consumption and the relative autonomy of economic, political and cultural fields that was of central interest.

Since Bourdieu, the term ‘cultural intermediaries’ has been appropriated to reflect all those cultural workers involved in mediating between production and consumption. For Hesmondhalgh (2006), this is a ‘misreading’ of Bourdieu’s original meaning. Negus (2002), on the other hand, argues that the term directs attention to the changes brought about by the growth of workers involved in the production and circulation of symbolic forms and encourages reflection on the reciprocal inter-relationships between cultural and economic practices that are often assumed to be discrete. Introducing their special edition on cultural intermediaries in this journal, Smith Maguire and Matthews (2012) argue that the term is ‘good to think with’ as it prioritises issues of agency, negotiation and power, ‘moving the everyday, contested practices of market agents to the fore for the study of the production of culture’ (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2012: 551).

Much contestation of the term ‘cultural intermediaries’ has largely centred on its terminological muddiness and need for more precise ‘specification of the division of labour involved in mediating production and consumption in culture-making organizations’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 227; Molloy and Lerner, 2010). Yet, a more serious critique relates to the conception of cultural intermediaries as self-interested economic actors, shaping use values and exchange values through the construction of markets (Negus, 2002). Cultural intermediaries are largely seen as prioritising economic over social or cultural values, representative of a shift in which culture is seen as a luxury which only counts if it can be commercialised or translated into a ‘creative industry’ (Pratt and Jeffcut, 2009). As a result, cultural intermediaries have been seen to have negative impacts, for instance, on community and civic Internet provision in the city (Myles, 2004), widening the distance between producers and consumers (Garnham, 2000: 162). They are representative of a particular kind of cultural worker, whose actions serve to reinforce existing social and cultural inequalities. Indeed, for some, the growth of cultural intermediaries has created ‘cauldrons of neoliberal gangs’ which ‘reinforce the cult of urban creativity’ (Kratke, 2010).

It is this economic and social movement away from Bourdieu’s original conception that O’Connor (2015) takes issue with. He outlines how, while the ‘old’ cultural intermediaries were inherently subversive – challenging cultural hierarchies and disrupting boundaries between forms of culture in ways that were essentially anti-elitist – the ‘new’ cultural intermediaries are implicated in the shifting movement from cultural to creative industries, seen as part of the broader project of neoliberalism. Drawing on evidence in the United Kingdom, he notes how cultural intermediaries have become ‘gatekeepers’, neither progressive nor democratising, part of the creative class, marginalised by real estate and subservient to deregulated elites:

it is clear that cities globally are investing heavily in the promotion of arts, culture and creativity as part of their global future. However, these are frequently done with minimal reference to

anybody who might be considered a 'cultural intermediary' and based on a cultural capital to be immediately cashable as economic value. (O'Connor, 2015: 10)

The critique therefore is that these cultural intermediaries are mediating between production and consumption in a process of economic value-making: adding monetary value, acting as a bridge, bringing goods to market. This has the effect, intended or not, of reinforcing and reproducing existing views of professionalised culture and cultural hierarchies. Yet given what Taylor (2015: 5) calls the 'polyvalent elusiveness of the creative economy', greater nuance and sensitivity to different processes of cultural intermediation are needed. He attests that intermediation can be located within a 'countervailing associationalist narrative' emerging within creative economy practice and discourse (Taylor, 2015: 2), noting the pluralistic discourses of values and regimes that illustrate the 'fissures' within economic imaginaries.

This suggests that the aspirations and dispositions of a wide diversity of actors mediating between production and consumption in different cultural and creative ecologies need to be further interrogated, including those engaged in 'the myriad creative forms and practices that saturate the dense environment of the everyday' (Edensor et al., 2010: 13). Intermediaries sit at the boundaries of multiple fields, not only between culture and economy but also culture, society and community. All such concepts are contested and subject to definitional debates, yet while nebulous, bring to attention the interest in community engagement, community arts, socially engaged practices and multiple creative practices that are not immediately reducible to purely economic value.

In her article on economic and social policy in the creative industries, Oakley (2006) argues that tackling exclusion in cultural policy must be a social and political priority and not 'an instrumental way of producing more film makers or videogames designers' (p. 271). Studies have tended to concentrate on economic sectors (see Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014), the middle classes or market actors. One exception is Durrer and Miles' (2009) study on arts administrators responsible for addressing targeted groups labelled 'socially excluded'. Here, they argue that the social inclusion agenda offers 'new ways of examining these initial interpretations of cultural intermediaries as providing a bridge between the market and culture' (Durrer and Miles, 2009: 229). Organisations and individuals operating in these fields present themselves not as reinforcing or reproducing markets and systems but challenging and inverting them, negotiating contradictory elements that 'cannot be incorporated in particular economic imaginaries' and 'linking actors from different fields whilst actively transform[ing] the knowledge that is being transferred' (Van Heur and Jakob, 2015). An emphasis is on mobilising latent capacity and realising aspirations through skills and training. O'Connor argues that cultural intermediaries could become ever more significant in contributing to social change in austere times, when 'the cultural hierarchies are much more fragmented and plural' (O'Connor, 1999: 7).

As such, there may be a third, hitherto neglected, concept of cultural intermediation at play in the 'conceptual palimpsest of layers, additions, erasures and elaborations' (Taylor, 2015: 5) of the creative economy. Are those people operating between professional and everyday cultures – seeking to mediate between multiple values, striving to invert rather than reproduce existing hierarchies – also cultural intermediaries? It is to

this we now turn, through a diary-keeping exercise which seeks to capture the voices of these participants themselves.

## Diary-keeping and narratives of cultural work

To date, diaries of artists have been of documentary and evidence-based interest to funders, policy makers, organisation and other artists (Allen, 2001), while artist and creative practitioner professional development programmes have also encouraged participants to keep diaries (Smith, 2003). Best known, perhaps, is Julia Cameron's (1994) *The Artist's Way*, which encourages the daily skill of writing 'Morning Pages'. Participant diaries, alternatively termed solicited diaries, are distinct from personal private diaries, as they are written with the full knowledge that the writing process is for external consumption (Latham, 2003; Meth, 2004). Solicited diaries can be usefully defined as 'an account produced specifically at the researcher's request, by an informant or informants' (Bell, 1998: 72).

In our study, solicited diary-keeping was used as a method to investigate the work of 20 cultural workers in Greater Manchester and Birmingham, UK, over the course of 1 month in Autumn 2013. The purpose of using diary-keeping in this context was to deepen understanding of the 'everyday practices' of participants (Certeau, 1984). Investigating the practices of such cultural intermediaries is underpinned by an increasing concern with the changing nature of everyday cultural work. Participant diary-keeping therefore acted as a performative record of the complex relationships and structures that condition cultural work.

Individuals were chosen from across four typologies of the cultural and creative sector defined by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council (creative preservation, creative activities, creative interfaces, creative communication), different urban areas (city core and districts) and across levels of power and employment stability (early-mid-late career; freelance/salaried; directors, managers and support roles). In many cases, diarists identified multiple 'occupations' reflecting varied roles and a portfolio of work, from artists-in-residence, artists, freelancers, independent creative producers, programme managers, directors of arts or community organisations and outreach or community workers. Consequently, unlike other studies of cultural intermediaries concerned with the culture/economy interface, our 'field' was not defined by sector, or industry, but through the positioning of the intermediary 'in between' culture and community.

Prior to the start of the exercise, participants were requested to submit their curricula vitae, describe their work and role in their own terms and list their current portfolio and priorities. They were also asked to make individual statements about why they were doing the work, what mattered to them, what they hoped to achieve and how. Finally, we invited participants to reflect on the terms of reference for the project itself, through commenting on the connections and disconnections between communities and the creative urban economy.

A template was created by the research team which we invited the respondents to feed into, rework or redesign during a first focus group prior to finalisation. The diaries were framed as a kind of 'performance-cum-reportage' of each respondent's weekly



activities as participants would be ‘putting less of themselves on the line’ (Latham, 2003). In practice, this meant that a daily log of activities (factual) was supplemented by the request for respondents to engage in a weekly commentary (reflective). Payment was built into the exercise to reimburse participants for their time – diary-keepers were given £300 as a one-off fee to keep a diary for the duration of the exercise. A second focus group then took place to capture experiences, issues and the process of the diary-keeping exercise itself.

A detailed analysis of the strengths and limitations of diary-keeping as a research process requires separate and extended methodological reflection. Nonetheless, a few points are worth noting here relating to the underlying power dynamics of the diary-keeping exercise. The researchers initiated the template and structure of the exercise; the meetings took place in University buildings, and the participants were paid and commissioned for their work. To this extent, a standard funder–client relationship was established from the start. The participants also inherited – and were asked to comment on – the terms of the project and particularly the concept of ‘cultural intermediary’. As with all solicited diaries, the diaries were written in anticipation of external consumption – in this case in exchange for payment and for university researchers with specific interests and research questions.

Writing for an audience raises the issue of bias and validity, in potential anticipation of a client. However, this is not unique to diary-keeping but applies equally to interviewing and other methods of social scientific research (May, 2011). The diaries are reflective not of an ‘objective’ but rather an ‘experienced’ world (May, 2011, Chapter 1), providing rich, agency-centred narratives which preference the voice of the participants themselves. Diary-keeping can be positioned as part of a more imaginative, pluralistic and pragmatic attitude to methodology and the kinds of research accounts it provides (Latham, 2003). In particular the appropriateness of diary-keeping for the study of cultural work is not only in producing accounts of daily working practices ‘unmediated’ by the researcher (for instance, as in an interview) but also in valuing the knowledge and expertise of participants as researchers in data collection and, to a lesser degree, analysis. In the account below, the names of diary-keepers have been changed.

## Revealing cultural intermediaries

### *Motivations and values*

The diaries suggest an alternative cultural moral economy to that of Florida’s creative class (Frow, 1995; Sayer, 1999). As accounts of cultural workers, they ‘contrast with the pessimistic assessments of neo-liberal fatalists, as they reveal moral commitments that contradict the popular model of the self-interested and depoliticised creative’ (Banks, 2006: 467). In contrast to a narrow economic-instrumentalism, the types of cultural work represented in the diaries were motivated by the general belief that culture can and should be an agent for social change. This was variably expressed as both an indirect effect of cultural programming and an active transformational creative gesture. For instance, Linda was motivated by a desire to commission and programme art that ‘touches and surprises audiences ... inspiring artists and making communities proud’. Elaine expressed



the interconnectedness between cultural activities and the fostering of a broader social consciousness:

Through creative opportunities, people can be encouraged to think with a more open mind and heart about the world around them: to embrace difference and welcome change, to believe in humanity and care about the planet.

Art was described as a 'life saver' by Clara. Jackie noted that 'the arts are useful, a right and necessity, not a luxury', while for Katie, the task was to create access to arts and culture, 'not just as a product to consume, but also as an agitator for change, as a means to express ideas, confront issues and add to people's lives'. Economic values were rarely discussed in terms of profit; however, making a fair wage from artistic work was a central issue. Through the diary-keeping process, John reflected on the low economic value attached to artistic work:

Well I'm certainly not doing it for the money ... we've been critically well received and the organisation has become fairly respected and recognised for its 10 years hard work. It has never made any money, however, and doesn't provide anyone with a regular wage.

A common theme was the high personal costs of navigating aesthetic, artistic and social ideas of value, particularly for those individuals who were engaged in production, consumption and intermediation in a blurring of roles. A strong example was given by John, who noted that

What used to motivate me was a desire to create social change through radical political art ... this has decreased as a driver as the financial mechanics required to operate such a studio [...] are increasingly difficult to implement ... what matters to me now is making and promoting my own work.

The context of this particular diary revealed a motivation to reclaim artistic integrity and 'earn a better living as an artist', given the costs of working at the intersections between culture and communities, which can 'drain ... personal practices dry'. While the question of artists' pay has long been an issue (Throsby, 2010), the process revealed an intensification of these pressures in the context of austerity in Britain, reinforcing a need for these intermediaries to focus on personal and professional survival at the expense of delivering positive societal change.

While moral values appeared more important than economic ones, the relationship between the social and aesthetic was less clear-cut. High-quality art as a motivating driver for their work was articulated by some participants, while for others access and usefulness were essential criteria: to make 'useful and not indulgent art' (Katie). Overcoming a perceived aesthetic/social dichotomy was a key theme, with respondents emphasising both quality standards and community engagement as mutually compatible goals. Yet throughout the diaries, a tension was revealed between strongly expressed values and commitments to different community groups and the perceived external values attributed to these activities in mainstream cultural urban policies. The diaries would suggest that this is due – at least in part – to working practices which reflect instability in

contemporary cultural work at the boundaries between professionalised and everyday cultural practices.

### *Practices of cultural work*

Often, diarists reported time spent trying to balance ways of working to meet the expectations of their organisation, funders and own priorities. A culture of completing administration on unpaid days off, especially for those freelancing or juggling two salaried jobs, was commonplace. Other respondents described working long hours, the majority of their time spent communicating with people on operational and strategic issues, bringing into sharp relief the frustrations and inefficiencies regarding time use. Moreover, a recent renewed emphasis on finding ways to work in partnership, made expedient by cuts to the funding of the cultural and creative sector, was articulated as time-consuming. This often meant moving into uncomfortable terrains in search of finance. Arnie, an Arts Development and Outreach Manager, described the ‘almost impossible task’ of accessing equipment (‘generator, projector, locations’) and finding dates for a partnership meeting, while Mary described networking, communicating and devising projects as ‘joining the dots between people’. Mick analogously described his work life as ‘like bees going from flower to flower’, with the caveat, ‘but it’s not as regular as that appears’.

Arnie reflected on a tough funding climate that has turned applying for national funding grants into ‘a relentless process’, with several drafts of a funding application required for internal checks prior to official submission. Balancing two jobs, Mary described the enjoyment of building relations with people and face-to-face work but the frustration of bureaucracy linked to that connectivity. The challenges of artistic practice, finding time to network, write academic funding proposals and attend meetings outside of the daily paid work meant she tries: ‘not to feel bitter that I can raise hundreds of thousands of pounds for others but I am always skint and am struggling to find PhD funding’. Yet despite finding it ‘hard’, and earning less than the minimum wage even with tax credits, Jennie described a feeling of being ‘rewarded every day’.

Across all the diaries we found evidence of the breaking down of boundaries between professional and private lives and shape-shifting across material and immaterial labour. For example, Charles, an artist on a portfolio of projects, described working a 12-hour/7-day week, pushing through the pain of kidney stones to work in a school before performing at a gig (while also balancing a young family). Rachel, working on a large-scale international project, observed, ‘It’s a very unusual working method, with no set routine or office base ... My office can be a favela one day, a hotel the next, a township the next’. However, between these distinctions is a more blurred area where some of the diarists have bounded day jobs in order to fund their artistic practice outside of this time. Clara, for instance, described her work as ‘making survival monies’, while Charles reflected that the diary-keeping exercise ‘affirmed the false boundary between life and art’. This mirrors recent work around ‘culturalisation’ – that is, a process by which some areas of life are designated as belonging to the problem of culture, and others not (Moor, 2012).

The intermediary role was reflected upon by some of the diarists as one which required a specific skill-set. A co-founding director of an arts organisation, who described herself as a community activist said, ‘a key role of mine is conversations and connections with

people and stakeholders; relationship building'. This involved face-to-face meetings, taking 'time together', in order to 'share intelligences and recent connections'. A combination of communication methods were used in order to connect with other cultural workers: 'chased people by email, text and phone calls to attend [exhibition] – as a gap in peers coming'. Another respondent also described actively 'scouting' for prospective people to get involved in projects: 'going to events, serendipitous conversations, though some might not lead anywhere'. Building trust was a key theme of work across all the participants. One diary-keeper reflected on his practice that 'trust is not a transactional foundation of relationships'; therefore, 'time spent with people is a way of building value'. His company – developing social media skills in community groups facing social and environmental inequalities – involved 'being there' for people, which was unsupported by a culture of project-by-project funding.

Investing significant amounts of time and energy into building and sustaining relationships also speaks to the difficulties in thinking through career development and progression within this complex field of cultural work. Here, the importance of peer networks was crucial. While simultaneously working on the mundane through to high level enquiries, connections were also described as important to take time to talk through ideas and projects with other peers and collaborators. For, as Jackie noted in the focus group,

Sometimes it doesn't pay off for you. What I find I do is I negotiate relationships and negotiate actions and I forget to include myself in that ... you see connections outside of yourselves and you make them, whatever the consequence.

A central issue was not about self-promotion, but rather self-effacement. Discussing the practice of cultural intermediation, one diarist noted, 'if I do my job well, you don't know I exist'. John concurred,

It's like shifting sand and juggling smoke. It's just a mess. Some days you stop and it's like you've been trying to juggle kittens blindfolded in a wind-tunnel and you ask why do I do this? Is it time for a career change? That happens on a daily basis if you're an artist.

Some of the diarists' pro-activity was coupled with a resentment of fulfilling unpaid and undervalued functions as 'cultural intermediaries'. Katie described 'beginning to realise it's an unsustainable way to work'. She was finding it harder to connect as a freelancer and relayed a daily struggle to build links with communities where the organisation is located and develop projects from 'idea to reality'. For many across the two cities, there was a stated inability to control the extent of networking, brokering and connecting functions, which was described by Susie as 'descent into organisational chaos'.

## *Culture/community interfaces*

Despite their stated motivations to connect with diverse communities, the diaries reveal the weight of effort invested in making connections, gaining funding, communicating and managing projects – suggesting a disproportional amount of time spent in creating the starting conditions for engagement. While 'community engagement', variously described, was central to the work portfolio or formal roles of the diarists, there were

multiple limiting conditions which shaped the extent to which this could be realised in practice. The diary-keeping exercise led Susie to realise that she wanted to ‘connect differently’, through greater face-to-face contact rather than by the tyranny of email:

If we want to be successful in meeting with our local community, we need to get out more on a personal basis ... the only way they’ll come and take part in an activity is to go and talk to them.

She noted the challenges of finding time to build relationships face-to-face while working in an organisation that is still relatively small, and also needing to write funding applications: ‘trying to find a balance between reaching people and actually being a “cultural intermediary” to people who need it, rather than those who would go and do it anyway [is difficult]’. For Mary, connecting with diverse communities requires ‘knocking on doors’ to foster more value-led connections. As Jackie also noted, ‘they are personal and emotional connections, they are not business connections’. Like Mary, Jackie described spending time ‘knocking on the doors of a sheltered housing complex to make personal connections with people there’.

However, practical and economic imperatives for participation and engagement were also emphasised. Jessie explained, ‘connecting with diverse groups is the only way of surviving – we need residents around us to be engaged as a business model ... It is not just an educational mission’. Intermediaries, in particular those publicly funded by research bodies, charities, trusts and councils, need to demonstrate a non-economic ‘marketplace’ for community-based research, a point acknowledged by Leanne when she says, ‘we can’t justify more funding if we don’t get more people’.

Each diary-keeper demonstrated individual methods and practices for how and why they work with different communities of interest, practice and issue. Elaine was particularly concerned with marginalisation by race and poverty. Mary’s personal practices were motivated by concern about gentrification, social justice and inequality. Charles was working in a number of schools following a strong commitment to young people’s creativity and self-esteem. Katie expressed a commitment to socially engaged contemporary arts practices with diverse community groups, while also developing arts in the public realm by commissioning activities with other artists. However, the language of the disadvantaged, excluded or ‘hard to reach’ appeared to be mobilised only in relation to funding bids or reporting, with cultural workers challenging official accounts of areas or communities with low or no cultural participation, preferring instead the celebration of everyday cultural activities and community spirit. This is suggestive both of the tactics that are deployed by those operating in the ‘grey spaces’ and of the marginalisation of community culture, ‘faced with joining the creative industries or urban regeneration regimes in pursuing economic or social, rather than cultural, aims’ (Evans, 2010: 20).

## *Subjectivities and identity*

Reflecting these tensions were multiple presentations of the self (Goffman, 1959 [1984]) through the formal *curricula vitae*, the statements that individuals made and the diaries themselves. The *curricula vitae* presented accomplished, sector-leading multi-taskers, consultants, tutors, project workers, creators and networkers. The statements presented frustrated social agents, agitators and artists. Meanwhile, the diaries themselves revealed

precarious, often struggling, cultural workers: undervalued and over-worked. As a result, subjectivities were transient and fluid, perhaps reflecting the porosity and unbounded nature of creative work:

My favourite title is Independent Creative Producer ... but I am working with the title 'Artist'. This means I am trying to bring some of the same care and attention to my own creative soul that I have been happily applying to others over the years. (Elaine)

I do struggle with the idea of myself as an artist because I have no formal training and at the moment I feel I am at something of a crossroads in my career. (Mary)

As cultural workers are actively constructing their identities in a situation of fluidity, anxiety and risk under conditions of reflexive modernisation, subjectivities are under constant re-evaluation and mediated by exogenous as well as endogenous factors (Beck, 2000; Beck and Ritter, 1992; Giddens, 1984). These identity struggles also explain the value which participants attached to the term 'cultural intermediary' in potentially reconciling different aspects of complex working practices. Across both sites, starting from initial suspicion, there was a resonance with the term 'cultural intermediary'. Clara said,

I found the diary extremely useful. I didn't realise how much I am a link between inside and out and I've looked at cultural intermediation from that point of view and it's been a really important process for me.

Meanwhile, Mary reflected,

A time of untangling opportunities and starting new paths ... I think I understand now why you call me a cultural intermediary. This is also apparent in my day job and the community engagement work I do. It's a strength of my interdisciplinary approach.

Unburdened by the weight of conflicting literatures on the term 'cultural intermediary', participants in the final focus groups felt that the descriptor offered a potential terminology to both reveal and re-value the complexity of their working practices. Overcoming some initial scepticism, the term entered into more common parlance among participants, given their difficulties in being able to 'fix' values and identities or describe their complex roles. Consummate multi-taskers, the participants were largely fulfilling hybrid roles, often not only producing their own work but also supporting other artists or mediating between the art world and the public (Forkert, 2014: 24). Their identities were not fixed, as artist, producer, programme manager or activist. This masked a range of frustrations and tensions exhibited by the diarists, intensified at a time of intense transition and change in the conditions for local arts provision in the United Kingdom.

## **Revaluing cultural intermediaries**

Deviating from Bourdieu's critics and cultural commentators, or professionals who mediate between production and consumption for economic gain, the diaries suggest a 'third

interpretation' that is qualitatively different from that of the 'new' cultural intermediaries of neo-liberalism (O'Connor, 2015). Analysing the diaries through the themes of motivations and values, practices, positioning at the culture–community interface and subjectivities and identities, the diaries illustrate how these cultural workers are not simply reproducing economic values but mediating between multiple and often conflicting ones. In particular, intermediaries are mediating between the pressures to make a living, maintain artistic practices, sustain organisations and spend time making contact with people on the ground. Their work sits between the array of agencies promoting and implementing 'creative industries' agendas or state-sponsored flagship cultural projects, agendas around arts and social exclusion, community arts and an everyday, vernacular creativity. They occupy spaces not only between culture/economy, as in Bourdieu's original interpretation, but also between culture/community. Performing multiple roles, individuals cross traditional boundaries between production and consumption, stating their aims and purpose in the written statements and focus groups as seeking not to intermediate between economic values and established cultural hierarchies, but to *transform* them. In this, they are more explicit than the 'old' subversive cultural intermediaries; instead of simply making culture available to broader audiences or making new 'consumers', these intermediaries are making new producers. Self-effacement, rather than self-interest, was noted as both a consequence of performing their job well and, for some, a desirable outcome. That is, if intermediaries were no longer needed, it would be reflective of a more inclusive, participatory and equal form of the creative economy. This suggests different answers to the question of 'who needs cultural intermediaries?' (Nixon and Du Gay, 2002).

We must resist a temporal linearity to the analysis according to discrete time periods, as many participants had been working for decades at the intersections between aesthetics, community engagement and creative economic activity. At the same time, the narratives illustrate how the boundaries between definitions of cultural intermediation are not water-tight. Interpretations are not mutually exclusive, nor do they suggest typologies according to which individuals or organisations engaged in creative and cultural work can be boxed (see Taylor, 2015 for instance). While it is tempting to posit that 'old' intermediaries were concerned with critique, 'new' intermediaries with economic reproduction and these 'third' intermediaries with transformation, the diaries suggest that the practices of cultural intermediation may not have such clear-cut outcomes. In the process of navigating the muddy spaces and interstices of creative and cultural ecologies, existing hierarchies may be inadvertently reinforced, particularly given the complex working practices and conditions in liminal spaces between professionalised and everyday cultural ecologies in the city.

Advanced capitalism is characterised by increases in insecure and irregular labour, with creative workers described as the 'poster boys and girls of the new "precarariat"' (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 2). This implies new kinds of cultural working practices at the intersection between production and consumption, culture, economy and society. The diaries revealed how daily activities were strongly influenced by external factors, resulting in complex, ramshackle, 24/7 working practices, which ironically threatened to constrain the realisation of their stated aspirations and motivations. A tension between individual creative practice and practice orientated towards 'helping others' can be seen, resulting in the squeezing out of time and space for engagement. The personal and professional



instability of cultural work serves to generate a tension in creative practice oriented towards helping others, as the boundary between private and working life becomes increasingly blurred. With scarce resources and project-by-project funding, attention is focused on networking and communication, often with peers and funders.

The concept of 'precarity' is helpful here, bringing these issues of precariousness in cultural work and moral values together, signifying both the 'multiplication of precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living and, simultaneously, new forms of political struggle and solidarity that reach beyond the traditional models of the political party or trade union' (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 3). Following Gill and Pratt (2008), the diaries give insights into the critical themes of affect, temporality, subjectivity and solidarity which shape contemporary cultural work. While passion, self-realisation and self-actualisation may be key driving forces, the negative affective feelings related to cultural work are often equally strong – fatigue, exhaustion and frustration. The famine and feast patterns of too little and too much work, along with a blurring of work–life, are amply evident as central preoccupations for all of the diary-keepers in question.

The work suggests two areas for further research. First, in further understanding these differences between stated motivations and critique, reproduction or transformation of cultural hierarchies, there are limits to what diary-keeping and narrative-based accounts can tell us. There is a need for more in-depth studies of particular organisations and processes, which 'pay attention to the ongoing structural trajectories of the capitalist economy, whilst attending to micro-structural assemblages, emergences and contingencies' (Taylor, 2015: 10). This would enable both a check on the wider applicability of these narrative-based accounts, as well as greater insight into how, in particular organisations or contexts, values are negotiated, positions occupied, pressures managed and communities supported – and the extent to which unintended consequences or outcomes might be reproduced. Second, despite the limits of diary-keeping, its potential as a method of eliciting voices from the field of cultural work is promising for future studies. Revealing motivations, working practices and subjectivities, we have used diary-keeping as a productive tool to examine the 'relationship between the transformations within working life and workers' subjectivities', an area that has been relatively unexplored (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 2). Solicited diary-keeping allowed for the knowledge and skills of practitioners to inform and shape the research exercise creating a negotiated and reflexive space (May and Perry, 2011) which was valued by participants during moments of transition, given the tensions and insecurities of creative work.

We suggest that the diary-keeping exercise has shed some important light on the 'blind spot around the material conditions of cultural production' (Forkert, 2014). In her study of 'Artistic Lives' (p. 3), Forkert leads us to question how the resourcefulness and ingenuity of cultural workers – or the lifestyles they represent – can be seen as justification for withdrawing certain kinds of state infrastructure. What our study confirms is that while resourceful and self-reliant, the creativity that these cultural workers bring to their urban contexts is not infinite irrespective of the conditions under which they practice. A field of cultural work is revealed that mediates between professionalised and everyday cultural ecologies in the city, one which is often obscured from view and undervalued. Belonging neither exclusively to the 'neoliberal gangs' nor to the 'real creative class', the diaries suggest that we should reclaim and re-value the term 'cultural intermediary' to



make visible the more morally and socially grounded cultural work of those who operate between diverse cultural, creative and social worlds.

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## Biographical notes

**Beth Perry** is Reader and Director of the Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures in the School of the Built Environment, University of Salford.

**Karen Smith** worked as Research Fellow in the Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures, School of the Built Environment, University of Salford between 2012–2014. She is now working as a Freelance Consultant - Arts.

**Saskia Warren** worked as Research Fellow in the Department of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of Birmingham. She is now working as a Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Manchester.